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Cognitive psychology of childhood – the invaluable heritage. On the 100th anniversary of L.A. Venger's birth

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Abstract

Context and relevance. The works of L.A. Venger continued the tradition of studying thinking, laid down in Russian psychology by L.S. Vygotsky and A.V. Zaporozhets. At the same time, his research combined Russian psychology of cognitive development with the ideas of foreign scientists, primarily J. Piaget and J. Bruner. The novelty and significance of L.A. Venger's views is that he focused on the dynamics of the formation of perception and the formation of sensory standards in early and preschool age, combining in his programs theory with the practical development of diagnostic methods and, at the same time, the formation of children's thinking. **Objective** is to analyze the origins, the theoretical and practical value of L.A. Venger's theory, and its significance for modern developmental psychology, including its theoretical knowledge and practical ideas. **The method of analysis** was the hermeneutic and historical-psychological reflection of L.A. Venger's works. **Results.** The article reveals and summarizes the content of the methodological, theoretical, and applied aspects of L.A. Venger's theory of cognitive development in children. It discusses its origins and the considerable novelty in the interpretation of sensory standards, the orientation in problem-solving processes, and the search for and use of information obtained during orientation. The works of L.A. Venger and his colleagues contain enormous potential for both diagnostics and developmental education of preschoolers and primary school students. The significance of L.A. Venger's cognitive theory of childhood for the theory and practice of modern psychology has been demonstrated. **Conclusions.** In the modern world, where both sensory standards and the ways of their representation and perception have changed, it is necessary to continue the direction in developmental psychology laid down by L.A. Venger and his colleagues.

Keywords: cognitive development, preschooler, sensory standards, perceptual action, mediation, visual modeling, orienting-research action

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Когнитивная психология детства — бесценное наследие. К 100-летию Л.А. Венгера

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Резюме

Контекст и актуальность. Работы Л.А. Венгера продолжили традицию изучения мышления, заложенную в отечественной психологии Л.С. Выготским и А.В. Запорожцем. В то же время его исследования соединили отечественную психологию когнитивного развития с идеями зарубежных ученых, прежде всего Ж. Пиаже и Дж. Брунера. Новизна и значение взглядов Л.А. Венгера — в том, что он сфокусировал внимание на динамике становления восприятия и формирования сенсорных эталонов в раннем и дошкольном возрасте, соединив в своих программах теорию с практической разработкой методов диагностики и, одновременно, формирования мышления у детей. **Целью** является анализ истоков, теоретической и практической ценности теории Л.А. Венгера и ее значения для современной возрастной психологии, ее теории и практики. **Методом анализа** стала герменевтическая и историко-психологическая рефлексия трудов Л.А. Венгера. **Результаты.** Раскрыто и обобщено содержание методологических, теоретических и прикладных аспектов теории когнитивного развития детей, разрабатываемой Л.А. Венгером. Показаны ее истоки и принципиальная новизна в трактовке сенсорных эталонов, ориентировки в процессе решения задач, поиске и использовании полученной при ориентировке информации. Работы Л.А. Венгера и его сотрудников содержат огромный потенциал, как для диагностики, так и для развивающего обучения дошкольников и младших школьников. Доказано значение когнитивной теории детства Л.А. Венгера для теории и практики современной психологии. **Выводы.** В современном мире, где и сенсорные эталоны, и способы их представленности и восприятия изменились, необходимо продолжать направление в возрастной психологии, заложенное Л.А. Венгером и его сотрудниками.

Ключевые слова: познавательное развитие, дошкольник, сенсорные эталоны, перцептивное действие, опосредствование, наглядное моделирование, ориентировано-исследовательское действие

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Introduction

In April 2025, the Faculty of Psychology at Lomonosov Moscow State University held a roundtable discussion dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Leonid Abramovich Venger, a leading scholar and prominent representative of the Russian school of psychology. His name often remains overshadowed by his outstanding teachers — A.V. Zaporozhets, A.N. Leontiev, and P.Ya. Galperin. It is time to remember that Leonid Abramovich's work contributed to the development of concepts regarding the mechanisms of development of basic cognitive functions during ontogenesis, and the operationalization of the functional content of a child's cognitive abilities paved the way for the development of diagnos-

tic tools and developmental programs for preschool-aged children (Venger, 1969; Venger, 1976; Venger, Agayeva, Venger, 1986). The results of this reflection and the synthesis of L.A. Venger's contributions were presented in the context of his impact on modern developmental psychology by his students and followers, to whom he dedicated many years of work at the "Laboratory of Preschool Psychology." As participants emphasized, L.A. Venger's ideas are deeply integrated into the scientific consciousness of contemporary researchers and form the theoretical basis of their work, although sometimes his original contribution risks becoming obscured. This underscores the importance of reiterating the key principles he introduced to Russian psychology. Doing so will prevent us from becoming "Ivans who forgot their ancestors"¹ and

¹ Transcript of T.D. Martsinkovskaya's speech.

will contribute to a thorough understanding of the origins of the scientific ideas we continue to develop.

Theoretical background

Leonid Abramovich's theoretical position was formed on the basis of a deep understanding of foreign psychology. An extremely erudite individual, he draws on the tenets of Gestalt psychology, cognitive psychology, and Jean Piaget's genetic concept, which determined the focus of his own scientific interests. His interest in sensory processes stems from Gestalt psychology, which views perception as the foundation of cognitive development. Koffka's works, which discussed the analysis and differentiation of images in the surrounding world, are reflected in Leonid Abramovich's discussions of sensory standards and perceptual modeling (Venger, 1976). A special place in the formation of his views is occupied by the idea of structuring space, creating a schema of the surrounding field of action during the process of solving a cognitive problem, developed in the works of V. Keller (Martsinkovskaya, 2009). The use of schemas (thought processes) in foreign cognitive psychology has become a crucial tool for processing information. This tradition defines the systems approach in the works of L.A. Venger, which also emphasizes the importance of the joint, holistic functioning of all cognitive processes working toward solving a problematic situation. In forming the conceptual apparatus of his own concept, the scientist introduces the categories of schematic thinking, modeling (construction) of a complex object, the components of which are the processes of analysis (identification of the elements that make up the figure) and synthesis of something new through the creation of a new system.

The work of J. Piaget, who defines mental development through the processes of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1994), plays a special role in the development of his own scientific position. This approach to development as a qualitative transformation of a holistic cognitive structure allows us to speak not of isolated images reflecting the world around us, but of a holistic cognitive system — a system that transforms as we gain knowledge of the surrounding world².

L.A. Venger's discussed areas of scientific thought are framed from the perspective of a cultural-historical approach, which is actively developing in Russian psychology. The scientist clearly defines his theoretical position, relying on the works of L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leont'ev, and A.V. Zaporozhets (Vygotsky, 1983; Vygotsky, 1984; Zaporozhets, 1967; Zaporozhets, 1986; Leont'ev, 2020). He becomes a representative of the Russian psychological school, clearly emphasizing its advantages³.

Fundamentally new possibilities open up when examining cognitive processes and perception, particularly as a special type of human activity with a specific struc-

ture. Leonid Abramovich emphasizes that the quality of a sensory product is determined not by the properties of the influencing object, but by the content of the subject's cognitive activity. In this regard, he calls for a focus on analyzing the content of this activity and the nature of the tools used by the subject. Emphasizing that the most important feature of the qualitative uniqueness of human activity is its instrumental nature, the scientist raises the question of the sensory standard as a kind of tool, the use of which elevates perception to a qualitatively new level of development.

In the works of L.A. Venger, we find the development of L.S. Vygotsky's ideas on the psychological content and structure of higher mental functions from the perspective of the activity approach. Where L.S. Vygotsky speaks of the sign as a psychological tool that fundamentally alters the structure of mental functions and transforms natural mental functions into higher ones, L.A. Venger substantiates the role of the model as a means of reflecting the essential features of an object and organizing cognitive activity as the basis for the formation of a person's universal ability to mediate (Venger, 1969; Venger, 1976; Venger, Agaeva, Venger, 1986).

A series of experimental studies conducted under the direction of L.A. Venger established the fundamental patterns of the formation of universal mediation ability in childhood. The initial stage of its development is the child's acquisition of a system of sensory standards (color, shape, etc.) and the formation of corresponding perceptual actions for examining the sensory qualities of objects using them (ages 3–4). The acquisition of sensory standards proceeds sequentially, beginning with the initial acquisition of standards independently of one another, with differentiation predominating, based more on the principle of distinction. Then comes systematization through the establishment of connections and mutual transitions (for example, colors and their shades, creating a continuum of transitions). It is precisely this systematization that opens the child's door to the use of standards to form a holistic sensory picture of the world. The development of perceptual actions proceeds within the logic of movement from the one-to-one identification of an object's properties with a sensory standard to the construction of an object's sensory properties using multiple sensory standards. While each standard cannot be individually identified with the object's sensory properties, their combined use, based on establishing similarities and differences, allows the child to construct an image of the object — in other words, to create, based on orientation, a new sensory quality that is not identical to any of the sensory standards used. This makes the child a true subject of perceptual activity: from the "applicator" of a ready-made standard and the execution of a learned method of action, the child progresses toward

² Transcript of T.D. Martsinkovskaya's speech

³ Transcript of E.I. Zakharova's speech

the "creator" of a new means of perceiving an object's sensory properties. In this way, L.A. Venger responds to the traditional criticism leveled at proponents of the strategy of purposeful formation of mental actions and concepts developed in the works of P. Ya. Galperin. The essence of the opponents' criticism boils down to the fact that such a strategy limits the child's mental development to the mere assimilation of predetermined models, leaving no room for creativity. The infinite diversity of the world a child explores obviously makes it impossible to fully equip them with a set of ready-made tools to successfully solve all cognitive and perceptual problems. The acquisition of a standard as a means of exploratory and exploratory activity aimed at understanding the world opens up space for genuine creativity in the child's creation of their own tools for understanding the world based on the sociocultural standards they have learned.

During the second stage of developing the ability to mediate, the child masters the act of visually modeling the properties of objects and the relationships between them, including spatial, temporal, and logical ones. The ability to represent the modeled relationships in a generalized form develops (5–7 years). L.A. Venger identifies three vectors of development of the ability to visually model. The first is the expansion of the substantive range of modeled relationships – from spatial to temporal and logical relationships. The second vector is from the creation of individual models to increasingly generalized models reflecting the essential properties of an entire class of objects and situations. This suggests an analogy with L.S. Vygotsky's position on the development of sign meanings – from complexes oriented toward the actually objective, individual properties of objects to concepts based on systematicity and the identification of the essential subject characteristics of an object. The increase in the generalization of models leads to the transformation of the form of models from the iconic form, preserving the external similarity with the object, to the conditional-symbolic, when the conventional form of the sign is sufficient to designate the object or its property, expanding the boundaries of the possibilities of generalizing the phenomena of reality by reflecting them in visual models. Finally, the third vector characterizes the functional development of modeling actions – from the actions of simple substitution (from 3 years) to the use of conditional-schematic models that have a semantic or conventional connection with the substituted object, as well as from the creation of models to the use of models as a means of orientation in solving problems of a cognitive or pragmatic nature (Venger, Pilyugina, Venger, 1988; Venger, 1976; Venger, Agaeva, Venger, 1986). The dynamics of the development of modeling actions is universal, which is confirmed by the facts of the development of play actions (Elkonin, 2025). In the early stages of play development, substitution is initially unrestricted, but the substitute and the thing being substituted are loosely connected, creating instability in the substitution. Subsequently, the boundaries of substitution are de-

termined by the ability to perform a play action with the substitute, i.e., based on similarity according to the principle of the iconic model. Subsequently, substitution is carried out based on a word with a stable meaning, i.e., based on a semantic connection, i.e., based on a conditional-schematic model. The general logic of the development of substitution in play and constructive activities testifies to the emergence and development of a truly general cognitive ability – a universal capacity for mediation (Beloshistaia, 2018).

L.A. Venger points to the dynamic unity of two processes – model creation and model application. Moreover, as established during experimental development, in some cases, model application precedes model creation and is a necessary condition for successfully mastering the skill of model creation. Why? There are two possible explanations. First, using a model to solve problems creates motivation and meaning for creating models as a means of solving them, ensuring that the child identifies the model's orienting function. Second, the practice of using a model, testing it as a means of solving a cognitive task, allows the child to identify the requirements for the model in accordance with the function it performs. Visual modeling, as a form of exploratory activity specific to preschool age, fundamentally transforms the child's cognitive position. In his concept of three types of learning and their corresponding three types of orientation, P.Ya. Galperin indicated that the third type of learning and its corresponding third type of orientation, aimed at mastering sociocultural means of analyzing objective reality, provide a developmental effect by mediating the child's cognitive position (Galperin, 2023). Visual modeling forms the basis for transforming the child's cognitive position and instrumentally equipping it with sociocultural standards. The effect of experimental learning, documented in a series of studies by L.A. Venger, which acts as an increase in the learning ability of preschoolers, ensured by the formation of generalized methods of action with sociocultural means – sensory standards and models, acting as a means of orientation in new problem situations, is a convincing confirmation of the importance of visual modeling as a mechanism for the formation of general cognitive abilities of the child (Venger, Venger, 2010; Venger, Pilyugina, Venger, 1988; Mead, 1988; Venger, Dyachenko, Agaeva, 1995; Venger, Mukhina, Markova et al., 1976; Venger, Davidchuk, Bure et al., 1977; Pirlik, Fedoseeva, 2022).

A crucial principle, brilliantly realized in L.A. Venger's experimental research, is that the content of mental action can only be investigated during its development. Consistent with the ideas of L.S. Vygotsky and P.Ya. Galperin, the scientist implements a genetic research method that allows for the identification of the structure of cognitive action at the stage of its external, material realization. Since an established cognitive action, having an ideal form, becomes virtually inaccessible to objective research, it makes sense to study it when it is realized in its genetically original, material form. Having successfully implemented

this principle in his study of children's sensory abilities, Leonid Abramovich succeeds in capturing the act of correlating the object's property (shape, size) with learned patterns of the main variations of this property — sensory standards. As an action develops, its qualitative transformations occur: from the physical association of an object with a standard through external motor operations (placing, applying, etc.) to association with the standard in the realm of perception. In this case, the actual movements of the standard and the object are replaced by gaze movements. Finally, a transition occurs to the execution of the action on an ideal plane, where the child's established concepts serve as standards, and gaze movements that allow for the association of the object with the standard are reduced.

The result of experimental research into the content and genesis of perceptual action is an understanding of any cognitive action as orienting, "...considering the process of perception itself as a unique orienting-exploratory action, performing the functions of examining the object and creating its image, through which the subject controls their behavior" (Zaporozhets, Venger, Zinchenko, Ruzskaya, 1967, p. 5).

Summarizing the results of a long-term cycle of research conducted under his supervision, L.A. Venger points out that the work of the laboratory he headed made it possible to substantiate the targeted formation of general cognitive abilities in the conditions of public preschool education as the main path of developing the child's cognitive abilities (Venger, Mukhina, Markova et al., 1976; Venger, Venger, 2010; Rubtsov, Isaev, Konokotin, 2022; Belova, 2024). The effects characteristic of experimental learning were established and proven — the alignment of children who took part in the training at a high level of development of cognitive abilities (sensory and intellectual) while maintaining individual differences. Indication of the sufficiency of the conditions of public preschool education, i.e., not the conditions of individual training, but the conditions of training in a kindergarten group, for achieving a developmental effect seems significant. This allows us to expand and enrich our understanding of the child's zone of proximal development, which can be effectively realized not only in the dyadic interaction of a social adult as a bearer of sociocultural experience with a child, but also in the space of purposeful construction of joint activities of a social adult in a children's community as a co-event that opens the way for development (Slobodchikov, Isaev, 2013). Recognition of the role of communication with peers in the formation of a child's cognitive abilities resonates with both M. Mead's position on the importance of configurative culture in modern society, where children teach each other (Mead, 1988), and with the assertion about the role of cooperation between a child and peers for his mental development and overcoming egocentrism of thinking in the concept of J. Piaget (Piaget, 1994). The study of the patterns and characteristics of interactions between a child and peers in the course of solving cognitive problems for the formation of the zone of proximal develop-

ment is a prospect for further research (Rubtsov, Isaev, Konokotin, 2022; Shur, Zuckerman, 2022; Zuckerman, Obukhova, Bilibina, 2024).

Sensory model

A special place in L.A. Venger's research is occupied by his discussion of a unique means of perceptual action — the sensory model. Considering criticism from linguistics scholars who critically assessed L.S. Vygotsky's use of the category "psychological tool as a sign," Leonid Abramovich speaks of a psychological tool. Focusing on the analysis of mental action, the scientist discusses the nature of the used psychological tool, linking its use to the mental operation (what to do with this tool). At the first stages, the sensory model has a real material form (a pre-model). It lacks exactness and universality, being applied situationally and in a limited space. Systematic use of the model leads to a generalized representation, an abstract form, detached from a specific physical object. Finally, models can be combined into a common system in which they are interconnected. Thus, considering the complex process of developing a "color body," we can say that a child initially becomes familiar with a specific color (for example, blue), but very quickly comes to understand that there are many blue colors. They differ from one another according to three dimensions (tone, saturation, and lightness), and full perception and categorization are possible only after constructing the entire system, which represents an organized space — a model.

Leonid Abramovich gives great importance to modeling activities. It is here that we see the systematic work of human cognitive abilities. When a girl puts her doll to bed after spanking it, she is modeling her life experience. Speaking about the study of the content of models characteristic for preschool age, L.A. Venger focuses on the quality of the child's cognitive processes. He described the phenomenon of didactic play, in which the action unfolds not spontaneously, but in a form suggested by an adult. Such play can be used as an age-appropriate method of teaching a child (Pirluk, Fedoseeva, 2022). The forms and functions of children's play remain the focus of scientific research in our time (Vachkov, Vachkova, 2025).

From image to schema

The discussion of the transition from a mental image, as a form that enables mental action, to a model is of particular interest to L.A. Venger. Considering the process of using a sensory model as a tool for differentiating surrounding objects, we must speak not about a single phenomenon, but about an integrated system — a model, a schema. The scientist notes that we often use different terminology to describe the phenomena under study. This is the natural state of science. It is important to establish where we agree, what is com-

mon in our understanding of the phenomenon. When discussing the development of schematic thinking in preschoolers, one can find analogies with the reasoning of J. Piaget, who examines the process of coordination and grouping at this age. However, a distinctive feature of L.A. Venger's ideas is the emphasis on the child's active participation in creating a model, constructing a holistic picture of the world, which will guide their behavior. The transformation of the sensory model leads to the formation of a schema, which becomes the prototype of a concept. The emergence of a verbal-logical form of the model's existence (scheme) becomes the next link in the genesis of cognitive activity. Thus, it can be argued that L.A. Venger made a significant contribution to the understanding of the cognitive development of early and preschool-aged children, creating a special branch of scientific psychology — the cognitive psychology of childhood. It is called cognitive psychology not only because cognitive development was the focus of L.A. Venger's theoretical and applied research, but also because the perception of information underlies this development. This is a fundamentally new modern approach, consonant with the ideas of cognitive psychology.

A new approach to diagnostics that became the key to uncovering the content of correctional and developmental work

Discovering the content of a child's cognitive actions and defining the logic of their genesis opened the way for the creation of an original system of psycho diagnostics. L.A. Venger notes the fundamental limitations of existing approaches to diagnosing a child's cognitive abilities, due to the fact that the analysis of the successful solution of proposed problems is based on the analysis of the products of the sensory process. The tasks presented to the respondent allowed for the recording the content of the sensory effect and the characteristics of the perceptual image, but not the process and conditions of their occurrence. Uncovering the genesis of a child's sensory abilities made it possible to evaluate the method of problem solving and the nature of the used tools. Analysis of the process of solving a test problem allows us to determine which mental processes are available to the child and in what form they are carried out. This makes it possible to determine the stage of development of a cognitive action, which does not so much characterize the "mythical abilities of the child" as it allows us to evaluate the path they have traveled and understand what tools should be used to equip them in joint activities with an adult.

Created under the guidance of L.A. Venger diagnostic methods, on the one hand, fully comply with the requirements of the normative approach to psycho-diagnostics, and on the other hand, contain structural components that allow focusing on the qualitative analysis of the action being performed. The creative team led by L.A. Venger clearly gravitates toward a qualitative, significant analysis of activity. Thus, the "Poly-

anka" method (R.I. Bardina, L.A. Venger) proposes tasks grouped according to the progressive principle of complexity, and a key for assessing the success of task completion (Venger, 1978). However, it is possible to assess the child's level of visual-figurative thinking development without using a point assessment, since the complexity of tasks occurs not through a quantitative expansion of possible solution options, but through the qualitative uniqueness of orientation toward one or two systems of reference points, toward the immediately upcoming action or toward the general scheme of task execution, allowing for anticipatory orientation (running two steps ahead).

The methods themselves enable completing tasks at varying levels of sensory maturity. For example, a child can identify the shape of a figure with a slot on a game board either through physical search or by using the perceptual image of the object. In either case, it is possible to develop an individual development program for a specific child.

This principle is embodied in original educational programs for developing the mental and artistic abilities of preschoolers. The internationally recognized "Development" program aims to equip children with cognitive and creative tasks (Preschool Educational Program "Development," 2016; Venger, Dyachenko, Agaeva, 1995). In constructing this developmental program, the authors are guided by the concept of the generalized nature of a child's mental abilities. Considering that mediation is a "generic" distinctive property of the human psyche, a strategy is developed for the child's mastery of perceptual modeling techniques, which subsequently allow these techniques to act as a general mental ability.

Conclusion

L.A. Venger's psychological concept fits seamlessly into the theory of childhood development which developed in global science in the 20th century. The principles of Gestalt psychology and J. Piaget's genetic psychology are reflected in L.A. Venger's programs and diagnostic methods. At the same time, the scientist's own theoretical position is built within the logic of the cultural-historical approach of L.S. Vygotsky and A.N. Leont'ev. Leonid Abramovich, developing the theory of higher mental functions from the perspective of an activity-based approach, substantiates the role of the model as a means of reflecting the essential features of an object and organizing cognitive activity, serving as the basis for developing a universal human capacity for mediation. L.A. Venger's research made it possible to implement the basic principle of diagnostics. In the tradition of Russian psychology, assessing a child's developmental level is carried out solely for correction purposes. The development of diagnostic tools aims to capture the problem-solving method accessible to a specific child. This allows, based on the concept of the general logic of the genesis of cognitive actions, the development of an individualized program to improve their cognitive abilities.

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